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magazine

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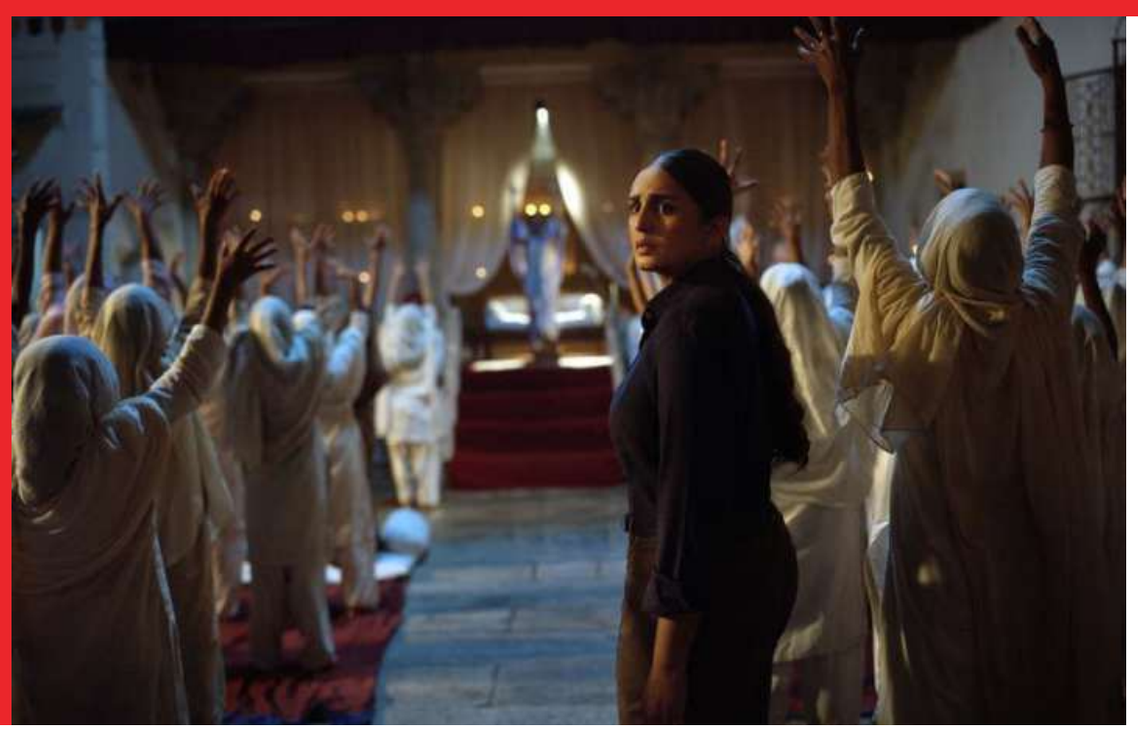
Global stage (Clockwise from left) Stills from *Ghost School*; *Bayaan*; *Gandhi*; and *Bandar*.



WHY INDIAN FILMMAKERS LOVE TIFF

A premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, which turns 50 this year, is seen as a gateway to the Oscars and global recognition for India's independent cinema

Meenakshi Shedde

It is the Toronto International Film Festival's (TIFF) 50th year. The perfect occasion to celebrate the fact that there is a record 17 films (including a series) in the official selection from India, South Asia and the South Asian Diaspora.

TIFF is especially valued, as it both flags off the awards season (Oscars, Golden Globes) and is an important gateway to the North American market. For instance, Payal Kapadia's film *All We Imagine as Light*, following its screening at Cannes and TIFF last year, won two Golden Globe nominations for Best Director and Best Foreign Language Film. Kapadia also garnered a lot of attention worldwide during her Academy Awards campaign even though her film did not win an Oscar.

S.S. Rajamouli's Telugu blockbuster *RRR* had already had a theatrical release in India and in the U.S., but as a part of the film's concerted Oscar campaign, the director was interviewed at TIFF in the Visionaries series in 2022. *RRR* went on to win an Oscar for Best Original Song, as well as a Golden Globe in the same category.

For Kiran Rao's *Laapataa Ladies*, its world premiere at TIFF 2023 no doubt partly influenced its subsequent selection as India's Oscar entry last year. These are all incremental gains, pushing Indian cinema towards a seat at the Big Table, the Academy Awards.

In 2024, 11 films were selected at TIFF from India, South Asia and Diaspora, and in 2023, 14 were selected. This year's 17 films and series chosen include eight films and series from India, four South Asian films beyond India, and five Diaspora films. This is an amazing feat, as each has been picked from over 8,000 submissions worldwide.

I love going to TIFF, not just for its superb film selection, but also because it's a very public-facing people's festival. And when I was on the red carpet in 2023, crowds of fans screamed "Ki-ran, Ki-ran". They mistook me for the *Laapataa Ladies* filmmaker, and I apologised, "So sorry, I'm not Kiran, but you should see her brilliant film *Laapataa Ladies*/ *Lost Ladies*," and we all had a good laugh.

Cinema without borders

"I'm over the moon," says Bollywood actor Huma Qureshi, whose film *Bayaan*, directed by Bikas Ranjan Mishra, has its world premiere in TIFF's Discovery section. In an author-backed heroine's role without a 'hero', Qureshi plays a policewoman in an investigation drama about abuse within a cult. "For any actor, TIFF is a dream because it's such a global platform, where cinema is celebrated without borders," she says. "It's also a validation of the choices I've made – stories that are a little risky, that push the envelope. My expectation is about conversations, seeing how audiences across the world respond to our film, how it travels beyond India."

The other Indian films at TIFF 2025 include Anurag Kashyap's *Monkey in a Cage* (*Bandar*), starring Bobby Deol, in a role that may be a redemption of sorts of his recent testosterone-driven outings in *Animal* (2023) and *Kanguva* (2024). Kashyap commends Deol for being "emotionally naked" with his character in *Bandar*, a prison drama with a different take on the MeToo movement.

He says, "I never gave him [Deol] a script. I would give him the scene just before we would shoot it. He has never done that before. I told him, you're not playing a hero, you are a character, one of many. It's just that the film is about you, so the focus is on you, but you're not playing a human being superior to anyone. And you're supposed to be emotionally naked. He took to the process like a fish to water."

Deol leads an ensemble cast with Sanya Malhotra, Saba Azad, Sapna Pabbi and a host of indie talents from regional language cinema (Riddhi Sen, Natesh Hegde, Indrajith Sukumaran, et al). Apart from being a hat-tip to the growing domestic appeal of Indian cinema, the casting may also help to amplify the film's appeal.

On a quieter note, theatre artist and filmmaker Jitank Singh Gurjar will also be at TIFF this year, with his deeply moving second feature, *In Search of the Sky* (*Vimukt*), about a lower-income family with a mentally challenged adult son and their journey to the Mahakumbh Mela in hopes of a miracle cure.

"Just being at TIFF will be a big moment," says Gurjar, who shot his film in Prayagraj at the landmark pilgrimage gathering that is estimated to have seen 660 million people earlier this year.

"Shooting at the Mahakumbh with a small crew was the biggest challenge, with the chaos, the scale, and carrying equipment through the crowds. But, at the same time, it was also the most satisfying part, because it gave the film an authenticity that cannot be recreated anywhere else," he adds.

The next big Indian film

This year, for the first time, India also has a series at TIFF. *Gandhi*, co-created by Hansal Mehta and Sameer Nair and produced by Applause Entertainment, is a lavish period series shot on several continents with an international cast and crew. "Being the first Indian show, one that is truly *swadeshi*, and to be on this global stage is, for me, already a vindication of the ambition, effort, and passion poured into its making. In a career spanning more than 30 years, this is perhaps the most ambitious and the most challenging story I've ever told," says Mehta. The drama tells the story of Mahatma Gandhi's early years and is based on historian Ramachandra Guha's books *Gandhi Before India* and *Gandhi: The Years that Changed the World*.

Clearly *Gandhi*'s producer Sameer Nair has a remarkable appetite for taking calculated risks as well. The big-budget series, starring Pratik Gandhi and Bhamini Oza, was made without having a streaming platform on board initially. "The rise of streamers in the past 10 years emboldened us to tell this great story in the premium drama series format across multiple seasons. We are following our business model of creating the material and then licensing it, so to that extent, it remains within the framework of what we usually do," says Nair.

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This year's *Parasite*

TIFF 2025, in its Golden Jubilee year, will showcase 209 feature films from around the world, including a massive slate of Asian-created and led productions of all sizes, with the highlight being South Korean filmmaker Park Chan-wook's buzzy new movie *No Other Choice*. Filmmaker Anurag Kashyap is among those cheering on the Korean black comedy. "*No Other Choice* is the best. I saw it last night," he says about the film touted by *BBC* to be "this year's *Parasite*". The story spotlights the anxieties of a man recently laid off from his job and who then goes in search of both a job and revenge.

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ANURAG KASHYAP
Filmmaker

FEMINIST POETRY

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

SISTERS OF SACRED ANARCHY

Arundhathi Subramaniam builds lyrical communion with her spiritual foremothers, mystic rebels and wandering poets in contemporary verse

Sudha G. Tilak

In her new book, *The Gallery of Upside Down Women*, Arundhathi Subramaniam offers a spirited tribute to Indian mystic poetesses and spiritual renegades from the past in verse. These are women who dared to abandon convention in their quest for transcendence and examined the wild wisdom that came from their tempestuous divine journeys.

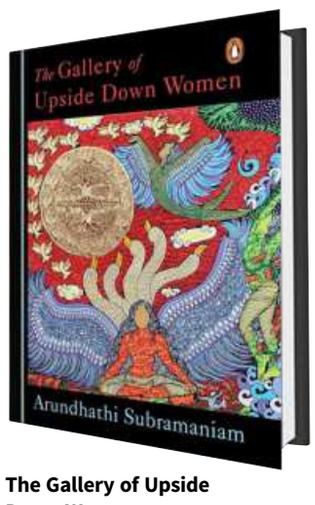
This poetry collection reads like a spiritual sequel to her earlier works – *Women Who Wear Only Themselves* (2021) and *Wild Women* (2024) – where Subramaniam chronicled the lives of female mystics who defied patriarchal confinement. This time around, she alters the spotlight. The mystics are not showcased as in a reverent museum under glass; we are made to behold them in a gallery hung askew, where the frames tilt, the labels mock convention, and the women gaze back through the verses. The result is intimate and reads like a lyrical sisterhood across time.

Subramaniam names these figures her "upside-down tribe", and indeed, the book feels like a gathering of an ancestral sorority, whose wanderings in the wilderness and uninhibited footfalls defined the sacred in radical terms for generations to come. These women are saints but not sanitised. They're bawdy, ecstatic, broken and burning.

Animating the saints
Akka Mahadevi, the 12th-century Kannada poet-saint who shed her clothes and domestic duties to seek union with her god; Karaikkal Ammaiyar, the 6th-century Tamil mystic who rejected beauty to become a ghostly devotee walking upside down on her hands at the foothills of Mount Kailash; Amrapali, the 5th-century BCE courtesan turned Buddhist renunciant, and Lakshminkara, the 8th-century Tantric rebel. There's also Sule Sankavva, the 12th-century prostitute-poet from Karnataka, singing the sacred through the soiled. And Shenkottai Avudai Akkal, Avvaiyar, Meera and others who felt more affinity with the moon than with marriage.

Subramaniam's poems offer tender kinship with these spiritual anarchists. Perhaps their acts of disrobing and daring were not madness, and their myths work as a mirror to the interior and a map to the exterior landscape they had to navigate for metaphysical clarity. Blurring the line between poet and pilgrim, Subramaniam wants to reclaim the feminine divinity buried under eons of sermon and shame and offer space for doubt if the mystics' paradise might only be found in *orchards far beyond the zip*

Subramaniam's poems offer tender kinship with these spiritual anarchists. Perhaps their acts of disrobing and daring were not madness, and their myths work as a mirror to the interior and a map to the exterior landscape they had to navigate



The Gallery of Upside Down Women
Arundhathi Subramaniam
Penguin
₹499

code of this planet.

The language in these poems is precise yet playful, and the verses are held up with animating imagery. Perhaps it is this tension between the domestic and the cosmic that Subramaniam relishes. One poem juxtaposes a "washing machine manual beside an Upanishad", capturing the contrast between sacred chaos and domestic order. Is this the version of the divine as it pulsates amidst us now? In laundromats and WhatsApp chats, as much as in monasteries?

She isn't merely celebrating these mystics but reanimating them, revealing how their radical acts still resonate in our hyper-modern lives.

She writes: *And edicts are still for pillars/ Certainties for fridge magnets*. Such lines are a nudge to appreciate her wry vision, where spiritual liberation requires quotidian or illusory modern metaphors. For those of us searching for that rousing hymn, or that definitive thrill as a sign, the poems seem to slyly suggest that today's epiphanies might be stuck or lost on the fridge beside grocery lists and school schedules.

More than a book of poems
A significant feature is the thread of exile that runs through the collection. *We're always eleven miles/ Away from home*, Subramaniam writes, echoing the eternal restlessness of the seekers. Yet, despite their wanderings, there's no grief; only mischief, melancholy, sensuality and solitude. And above all, freedom and the comfort of kindred spirits, in Madras or Manhattan, because, *All's well in the world/ when two women drink chai together*.

In reclaiming these voices, Subramaniam invites us into a gallery not of saints, but blazing, barefoot women who chose sacred radicalism over sanctioned domesticity. Their unconventional pilgrimages have bequeathed us hymns that illuminate our contemporary journeys.

A restless grace infuses *The Gallery of Upside Down Women*. Subramaniam is not interested in conclusions or final destinations; she's interested in freedom and what it costs, what it tastes like, and how women have sung of it across centuries. That's why *The Gallery of Upside Down Women* works as more than just a book of poems. It doubles as both prayer and provocation.

The reviewer is the author of Temple Tales *and translator of* Hungry Humans.

Hear me out, sakhi

K. Srilata's book of poems on five women from the *Mahabharata* is raw, powerful, and delicate all at once

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Words dripping with desire and longing, words weighed down by grief and betrayal, words so tender and fragrant with love: K. Srilata's *Footnotes to the Mahabharata* is filled with gems that leave the reader staring at a blank wall every few minutes.

Srilata presents stories of five women from the war epic – Alli, Hidimbi, Draupadi, Gandhari and Kunti – in the form of poems written as *haikus*. There is also a whiff of Sangam poetry, with the titles of each poem describing exactly who is talking to who. A majority of the poems are monologues: she opens out her heart in its rawest form to the listener, her *sakhi* who neither judges nor pacifies, but simply listens.

When Alli says to her friend, *It's to myself I belong,/ not to men who take me against my will*, one feels her pain from being tricked by Arjuna. When Kunti talks to her friend about Maruta, she says, *Sakhi, like an ant/ that has fallen/ into honey,/ I drown,/ even as I sip/ on the sweetness/ of love* – her yearning for the army chieftain of the Devas, with whom she was instructed to sleep by her husband Pandu, is conveyed through a precious few words.

Footnotes to the Mahabharata
K. Srilata
Context
₹350

A still from the 2003 film *Matrubhoomi: A Nation Without Women*, a dystopian parody of Draupadi's story.

The women who endured
What are Draupadi's thoughts when she sees Arjuna for the first time? When Bhima cajoles her into spending every night with him when it is Yudhishtira's turn with her? When she hears the words, *King Duryodhana commands that you go to him?* What do Pandu's words, *The pleasures of the body/ are as fleeting as dreams*, do to Kunti's psyche? What does Gandhari see behind the blindfold she chooses to don all her life? What does she feel about the war that took away everything from her?

There are lines that are just delicious: *But on bad days/ my thoughts turn to him/ as sunflowers to sun/ and I mourn the life/ that might have been mine*. Some others, devastating: *Don't tell me who killed my sons/ and how they went about their business*, says Gandhari to her friend; *Sharper than knives, their eyes,/ their crawling hands*: Draupadi tells her *sakhi* when describing the humiliation she faced in Duryodhana's court.

The poet, interestingly, has chosen to start with Alli, the warrior queen of Madurai, whom she describes is "exclusive to the Tamil Dravidian tradition". In keeping with her roots, Alli addresses her friend in Tamil as "*thozhi*" instead of "*sakhi*" as used in the other poems. Her sequence is followed by Hidimbi's, who, in the end, asks herself, *Are we but footnotes in the war?*

Footnotes to the Mahabharata is the kind of book one reaches for when weighed down by the weariness of the world and existence. Surely, the women within its pages are bound to offer some succour, simply because they endured.

Unforgiving memories

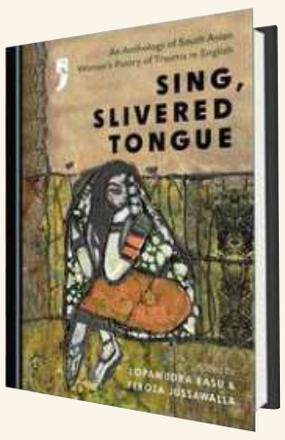
This anthology of 68 poems reflects on womanhood in a patriarchal society, with trauma as the focal point

Nandini Bhatia

South Asia, the land of hymns, Vedas, and folklore, has produced great writers and poets; not just men but women; some celebrated, some unsung. Nightingale of India, Sarojini Naidu, Rajasthani-Gujarati poet Mira Bai, Sinhala poet Gajaman Nona, Punjabi poet Amrita Pritam, Hindi poet and Jnanpith awardee Mahadevi Varma, Urdu poet Kishwar Naheed, and many others are a part of our poetic heritage.

Acclaimed writer-poet Kamala Das once said, "The language one employs is not important. What is important is the thought contained by the words." All these women from the past and all of the 68 poets in a new anthology titled *Sing, Slivered Tongue*, reflect on the plight of womanhood in a society that trades in their freedom, education, body dignity, and more. Trauma, the focal point of this poetry collection, has and will always be a lesson in intersectionality. Womanhood converges with the colour of one's skin, their caste, class, and sexuality, and at times, the political and ethnic conflicts in the background. Trauma and its memories are unforgettable, and as the 17-year-old girl in Mahvash K. Mohtadullah's poem 'Ravaged' calls them, "unforgiving".

Edited by poets and scholars Lopamudra Basu and Feroza Jussawalla, this anthology is a response to the injustice and silent sense of loss women bear. Among known names such as human rights campaigner Zerbanoo Gifford and writer Tishani Doshi, many new voices emerge.



Sing, Slivered Tongue
Ed. Lopamudra Basu and Feroza Jussawalla
Yoda Press
₹499

Wrestling her way out
The Buddha's bowl becomes a metaphor for abandonment in the opening poem 'Yashodhara' by Vinita Agrawal. The female body turns on itself, becoming its biggest weakness and a burden in Shafinur Shafin's 'My Body, My Enemy'. The legend of Khona, the ancient mathematician-astrologer whose tongue was severed for being a threat to her male contemporaries, is revisited in Radha Chakravarty's 'Severed Tongue'. Lopamudra Basu's 'White Roses' reminisces the absent streets and hushed skies of the COVID-19 years, with no flower vendors on the roadside nor any firewood for a graceful farewell to the departed. A mispronounced name becomes a constant "reminder of unequal exchanges – across skin and citizenship" in Arunima Bhattacharya's poem.

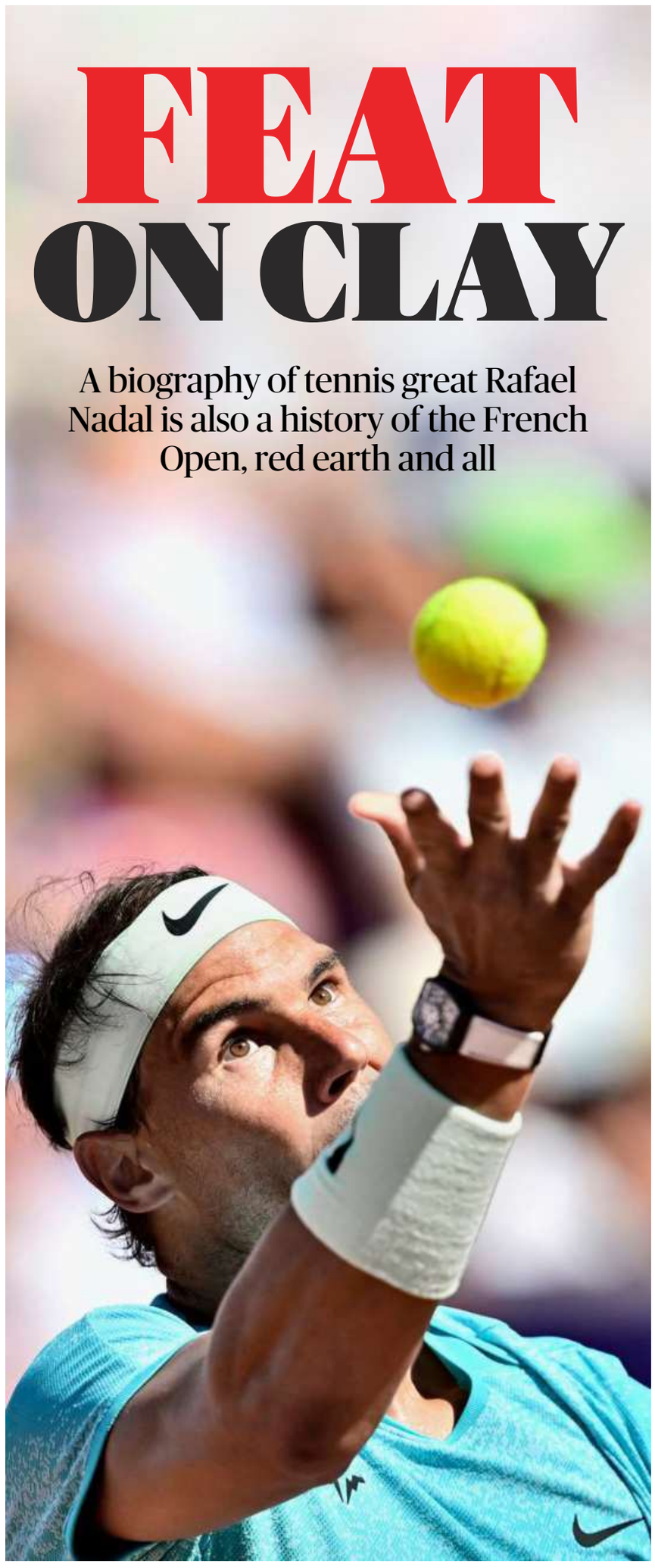
Drawing inspiration from Emily Dickinson to Franz Kafka to Faiz Ahmad Faiz, poems are dedicated to rape victims like Nirbhaya (2012); or the Dalit teen whose abused body was cremated without her family (2020); the doctor trainee in Kolkata (2024); and even to wrestlers like Olympian Sakshi Malik for "*wrestling [her] way out of a mother's womb*" in a state that has to import brides.

Women everywhere are no strangers to these themes. The desire for a male child; the female body seen as a vessel, not deserving of sensual pleasure, only of providing it; forced marriages; displacement, emigration, and unwelcoming policies against asylum seekers – are all issues that have unfortunately become a part of our social fabric. In response, each poem in *Sing, Slivered Tongue* echoes the "*wisdom born of pain*" as sung by Helen Reddy in her feminist anthem 'I am woman, hear me roar'.

The reviewer is a feature writer. Instagram @read.dream.repeat

FEAT ON CLAY

A biography of tennis great Rafael Nadal is also a history of the French Open, red earth and all



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The best biographies, seemingly, are written from a distance. Authors should not be emotionally invested in their subject's journey, but at the same time position themselves not too far away so that they get a ringside view of the happenings. Dispassionate storytelling and subject-matter expertise are the needs of the hour.

Christopher Clarey's *The Warrior: Rafael Nadal and His Kingdom of Clay* ticks these boxes. An overwhelmingly positive account – except for the soft rap on the knuckle towards the end for Nadal having become the ambassador for the Royal Saudi Tennis Federation – it is his second portrait of a legendary tennis player after *The Master: The Brilliant Career of Roger Federer*.

A third on Novak Djokovic can complete the trilogy of documenting the lives of the 'Big Three', who collectively won an astounding 66 of 81 Majors from Wimbledon 2003 to US Open 2023.

As the title announces, Nadal's story is told through his mind-boggling feat on clay – a record 14 French Open crowns, a 112-4 win-loss record in Paris, 63 titles on the dirt and a 484-51 win-loss metric, which meant he won nine out of every 10 matches he played on the most demanding and bruising of tennis surfaces.

Clarey brings to the table his trademark attention to detail, a feature that embellished his reporting for *The New York Times* and *International Herald Tribune* for decades. And the sheer

(From left) Novak Djokovic, Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Andy Murray. (GETTY IMAGES)

number of voices, gleaned through first-hand interviews and press-conference nuggets, enriches the prose. Even Nadal's first victim at the French Open in 2005, an unheralded German named Lars Burgsmuller, has been tracked down.

Nadal has always had a philosophical bent of mind, and the book has done well to showcase that inner working – of considering his work ethic as the ultimate gratification, normalising nervousness and self-doubt, and his famed duality, which was "a blend of self-control with competitive passion, modesty with ambition, and destructive force with ingrained common decency".

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Era-defining rivalries

In pure tennis terms, the Spaniard's shot mechanics, when juxtaposed with Federer's majestic style of play, couldn't survive the battle of perception. But Clarey resurrects it to its rightful place, especially Nadal's rousing forehand, explaining in fine technical terms both the traditional wrap-around version – immortalised as a statue at Roland-Garros – and the reverse.

There is a non-linear narrative to the book where timelines are manipulated through little flashbacks and a degree of reverse chronology. The chapter titled 'The Canvas' is a tour de force on how the modern-day red clay came into being, as Clarey traces the arc back to the 1800s to chart out the history of "*terre battue*" which literally means "beaten earth".

There are also informative profiles of *les Mousquetaires* – Jean Borotra, Jacques Brugnon, Henri Cochet and Rene Lacoste – and Suzanne Lenglen, who together shaped French tennis history in the early to mid-1900s, and of Philippe Chatrier, the only player-administrator after whom the main show court is named at the Grand Slam level. In a sense, the entirety of Nadal's career has played out in the visual era, which means there are very few stories hitherto unknown or untold. This makes the job of a biographer that much more difficult. However, Clarey aces the test, writing engagingly on Nadal's formative years and his two era-defining rivalries with Federer (24-16) and Djokovic (29-31).

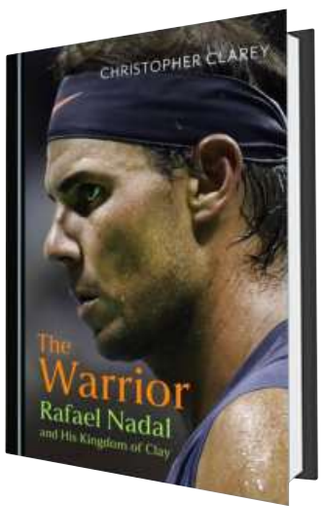
He recounts the classic matches – the twin Wimbledon finals in 2007 and 2008 which first established Nadal as an equal to Federer; his Australian Open final bouts in 2009 and 2017 against the celebrated Swiss which triggered fascinating mutations in their equation; the marathon 2012 Australian Open final versus Djokovic that left both men on the verge of a collapse, and the see-saw 2013 French Open semifinal that sealed the Serb's status as the greatest threat to Nadal's supremacy on clay.

Some misses

A notable miss, however, is the enthralling Wimbledon 2018 last-four clash where Nadal and Djokovic battled over five sets across two days. For both players, grass-court skills were not innate but acquired. But that didn't stop them from collectively winning nine trophies at the All England Club and managing six runner-up finishes. That semifinal was the acme and it certainly deserved at least a few drops of ink.

Similarly, while a lot has been written about Nadal's close circle, which includes his highly influential uncle Toni, father Sebastian and coaches Francisco Roig and Carlos Moya, there is precious little about his relationship with his mother Ana Maria Parera.

Overall though, the 337-page tome is a great addition to existing tennis literature. It is meticulously crafted, has a captivating feel, and goes the extra mile. Nadal's career wasn't too different.



The Warrior: Rafael Nadal and His Kingdom of Clay
Christopher Clarey
Hachette India
₹799

Sordid saga

Two writers use an unsolved murder case to explore various aspects of 1970s Pakistani society

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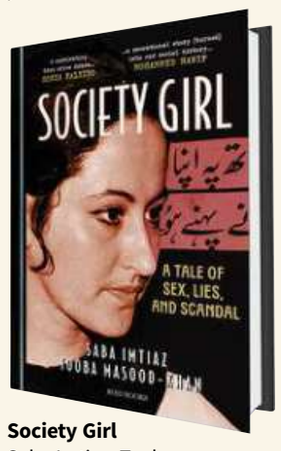
In *Society Girl*, journalists Saba Imtiaz and Tooba Masood-Khan foreground a sensational case in Pakistan that remains unresolved to this day.

It is October 1970. Saiyid Mustafa Hasnain Zaidi, a 40-year-old poet and civil servant, married with children, is found dead in his house in Karachi. A minor socialite, Shahnaz Gul, married with children, is found unconscious next to him. The "first jet-set murder case", as the Associated Press termed it, sends Pakistan into a tizzy and gives rise to unsubstantiated rumours and malicious gossip. When all kinds of theories – from the plausible to the absurd – are put forth by the public and the media alike, the police, which botch the initial investigation, feel all the more compelled to provide answers.

In their introduction, Imtiaz and Masood-Khan say that they initially planned to write a longform piece on the case that they both stumbled upon separately. "But we quickly learned that this wasn't easy as we thought," they write. "The story didn't seem to hold up and had become overshadowed by the circumstances leading up to Mustafa's death, instead of how he had died."



Society Girl
Saba Imtiaz, Tooba Masood-Khan
Roli Books
₹595

It is easy to see why the decision to write a book instead became so tempting. While it is clear from the start that there is no resolution in the case, Imtiaz and Masood-Khan use it to explore various aspects of 1970s Pakistani society: the lives of the elite, who party and entertain endlessly; the workings of a voyeuristic media; the patriarchal lens from which the entire episode is reported and investigated; and the grave socio-political tensions that recede to the background because of a brutal regime aided by a pliable press.

Wild rumours

This dissection of a society caught between tradition and modernity makes for an engaging read, but the book suffers from overwriting. About the Profumo affair that shook British society more than a decade earlier, the authors write, "It blew up into a national security crisis, and a lurid scandal, revolving around sex, extramarital affairs, women and politics, and the idea of morality." Just a few paragraphs later, they reiterate: "Christine Keeler became an incredibly notorious figure – a woman who had slept with influential men, and embroiled sex and morality into politics and national security affairs." The words 'morality' and 'sex' are used copiously in the book. Elsewhere, the authors also spell out the wild rumours about Mustafa's escapades in bed. While their intention is to underline the callousness of the media, they run the risk of getting trapped in the very sensationalism that they criticise. And when they meander, which they often do by offering anecdotes about all those in power in Pakistan, the case becomes a footnote.

The Zaidi-Gul case burst into the headlines at a time when there was little known about mental health. Imtiaz and Masood-Khan are at their best when they research and write with sensitivity about Mustafa's struggles with depression in a society that scoffed at or ignored his condition. They also give the complex, vilified Gul a voice and space. This empathy and female gaze are essential, especially since a man and woman are always judged differently during any torrid public scandal.

Beyond Ram Rahim

Understanding the unique belief system of the Deras, an offshoot of older religious traditions

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The Deras of Punjab frequently make it to the front pages of newspapers, largely in the context of elections and because of their propensity to vote as a block. But they also make headlines for other reasons, not least because of the case surrounding the Dera Saccha Sauda and its guru, Ram Rahim, and his incarceration and frequent paroles. *Deras: Culture, Diversity and Politics* by Santosh K. Singh is a scholarly work looking into the syncretic and often "fuzzy" (the author's words) world of South Asian religious traditions which have a propensity to mix and merge while still retaining individual characteristics. While profiling the Deras, Singh looks at caste, hierarchies, rebellions against older religions and new traditions of faith, and the many Deras dotting the landscape.

The book begins with a field report of a village in Punjab,

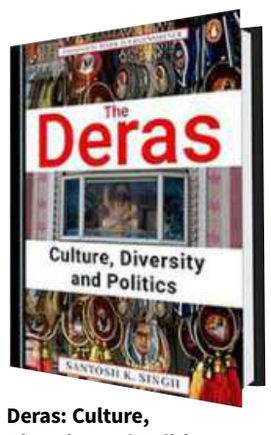
Dera followers at a gathering in Bathinda. (GETTY IMAGES)

Gehuna. There, *gurdwaras*, a shrine to the village deity, Nagarkheda, a *pir mazar* within the home of the Sikh Lohar family, Ravidassia gurdwaras of Scheduled Castes, and an amalgamated place of worship of Baba Farid and Sheetla Mata co-exist, a shining example of the syncretism that the writer wants to highlight.

Singh also takes into account changes sweeping through the village for various reasons, including the advent of modernity, proximity to a big educational institution built on erstwhile farm land with its attendant corporate networks, and influx of migrants.

In this backdrop, Singh says the Deras are increasingly becoming signposts of identity politics based on caste.

The book examines the historical circumstances of the emergence of Deras in detail. This includes the Adi Dharm movement, and various other ways in which the underclass of caste hierarchies spun away when older religions failed to fulfil the promise of equality.



Deras: Culture, Diversity and Politics
Santosh K. Singh
India Viking
₹699

Under the banyan tree

Singh likens South Asia's religious landscape as an "ancient banyan tree, where it is difficult to distinguish between the main trunk and its offshoots, that over time have come into their own and developed an independent vertical identity."

There are of course progressive reasons for Deras to flourish, but Singh says there's no political pivot among the community – there's "neither Ambedkar no Phule". This, says Singh, gives us a warning that all Deras must not be clubbed into one category. To do so, he adds, would be to impoverish our knowledge of their world. The idea of Deras springing from a kind of common geographical space must not be conflated to mean that these entities constitute a monolith.

The book is an important study of a phenomenon few understand. And because of the political transactionalism that accompanies electoral politics, the Deras have been confined in recent public discourse to the more sensational aspects.

WHY INDIAN FILMMAKERS LOVE TIFF

(Clockwise from left) A still from *In Search of the Sky*; and filmmakers Hansal Mehta and Bikas Ranjan Mishra.

CONTINUED FROM » PAGE 1

The ambitious sentiment is echoed by *Bayaan* producer Shiladitya Bora. "I see selection at TIFF as part of a larger vision of pushing Indian cinema into the global mainstream in a way that films from South Korea, for instance, have managed to do," says Bora, founder of Platoon One Films. "We've had great moments in the past with films like *Lunchbox*, *RRR*, and more recently, *All We Imagine As Light*, but we are still waiting for that one film that will become a global phenomenon, like Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* or Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite*. Can *Bayaan* be that film for India? It is a story with a global appeal, and TIFF is the perfect launchpad to start its journey around the world."

Journey to the Oscars

From South Asia beyond India, there's British-Pakistani filmmaker Seemab Gul's *Ghost School* in Discovery, Bangladeshi director Adnan al Rajeev's *Ali*, which received a Special Mention in Cannes' Shorts Competition; and Pakistani director Sana Zahra Jafri's *Permanent Guest*.

One of TIFF's centrepieces will be *Hamlet*, British actor-rapper of Pakistani descent Riz Ahmed's reimagining of Shakespeare that has been "13 years in the making...," wrote Ahmed on Instagram. The film was launched at Cannes in 2022, when Ahmed and director Aneil Karia told entertainment portal *Deadline*, "Our Hamlet is an outsider in a wealthy British Indian family, who starts to question his relatives' morality and his own sanity after encountering his father's ghost." Also premiering at TIFF after much delay is Indian-origin American standup comic-actor Aziz Ansari's directorial debut *Good Fortune*, starring Keanu Reeves as angel Gabriel, and Sandra Oh.

TIFF is one of the Big Five global film festivals that also comprise Cannes, Berlin, Venice and Sundance. Premieres at TIFF are crucial because they lead up to the awards season. Unlike the other A-lister festivals, TIFF, like Berlin, is among the most accessible. Its commercial, popular cinema draws in the crowds who are then introduced to independent arthouse and New Wave films that are a crucial part of the festival's mix. TIFF is a gateway to North America as the U.S. theatrical release/screening is a key step in the journey to the Academy Awards.

While Cannes premieres are the first indicator of Oscar probables, over the decades, TIFF openings have also secured Oscar nominations and wins. Notable TIFF-to-Oscar success stories include *Chariots of Fire* (1981), which launched this predictive tradition, followed by *Life Is Beautiful* (1998), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012), *La La Land* (2016) and *American Fiction* (2023).

The India connect

Rima Das's *Village Rockstars* (2017), Lijo Jose Pellisery's *Jallikattu* (2019) and Kiran Rao's *Laapataa Ladies* (2024), all TIFF world premieres, were sent as India's official entry for the Academy Awards. TIFF not only discovered Das and turned her into a global name, it made Indians sit up and take note and give Das the National Award in 2018. Das has since been a festival alumna, often premiering her films at TIFF and Berlin. Back in 2007, *Mr. India* director Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* premiered at TIFF and went on to get Cate Blanchett a Best Actress nomination and won Alexandra Byrne the Best Costume Award at the 2008 Oscars.

Filmmaker Shonali Bose – whose *Margarita with a Straw* (2014, co-directed, written and produced with longtime collaborator Nilesh Maniyar) won the NETPAC Jury Award at TIFF – attests to the leverage provided by the Canadian festival. "I consider myself a TIFF baby and feel very lucky that all my fiction films have been selected there, the last one being *The Sky is Pink* [2019], the only Asian film in the Gala section. Here's a funny story: Cameron Bailey [CEO, TIFF] first saw my debut, *Amu* [2005], in Berlin at its world premiere. After my Q&A, he came up to me and offered TIFF. I said no at first, since it meant I couldn't screen anywhere else till September. Other filmmakers said, 'Are you crazy?' So, I chased him down to say yes. Cameron has been a huge supporter and friend since."

TIFF premieres usually help with finding distributors/sales agents globally and help in theatrical releases back home, especially for smaller productions such as Nithin Lukose's Malayalam debut *Paka* (2021) or Jayant Digambar Somalkar's Marathi indie *Sthal* (2023), for instance. But there have been exceptions such as Ritwik Pareek's Rajasthani satire *Dug Dug* (2021) which remains unreleased in India.

This year, apart from the 17 selections, SRFTI (Satyajit Ray Film & Television Institute) alumna Kunjila Mascillamani's work-in-progress Malayalam feature debut *Guptam* (*The Last of Them Plagues*), co-produced by Jeo Baby, Richa Chadha and Ali Fazal, Payal Kapadia and Kani Kusruti, has been selected as one of the 16 global filmmakers for the competitive talent development programme, TIFF Director's Lab.

Delhi-based contemporary photographer and filmmaker Sohrab Hura, the only other Indian to be on the prestigious Magnum Photos member collective since Raghu Rai, will also premiere his shoestring budget film, *Disappeared*, at TIFF.

(With inputs from ***Tanushree Ghosh****)*

What makes TIFF special is how it supports filmmakers beyond the screenings. With networking events and filmmaker meetups, the festival creates an inspiring space. Having had three of my films premiere at TIFF, it has become very close to my heart. Each time, it reminds me why storytelling is so powerful

RIMA DAS
Director of *Village Rockstars*, India's official entry at Oscars 2019

The Mumbai-based writer is a film curator/ programmer to the Toronto, Berlin and other film festivals worldwide since 30 years. She is not a part of the final selection committee at TIFF 2025.

Also showing at TIFF 2025

***Homebound*:** Directed by Neeraj Ghaywan, produced by Dharma Productions and executive produced by Martin Scorsese, the film premiered at Cannes this year. Headlined by Ishaan Khatter, Vishal Jethwa and Janhvi Kapoor, it tells the story of two young men whose friendship is tested when they join the police force in a politically charged India.

***Aranyer Din Ratri*:** Satyajit Ray's 1970 classic, restored in 4K, showed at Cannes Classics this year and will be screened in the TIFF Lightbox section. It tells the story of four young men on a trip to a forest, where the veneer of urban masculine hypocrisy peels off.

***Sholay*:** The 1975 Bollywood classic, directed by Ramesh Sippy and written by Salim-Javed, is part of TIFF's Special Presentations. The dacoit Western follows two vagabond friends who are recruited by their old frenemy, a principled ex-cop, to rid the village of the villain.

***Agapito*:** After its Cannes premiere, the much-talked-about Filipino short film, directed by Arvin Belarmino and Kyla Danelle Romero, has been selected for the Short Cuts Programme. It tells the story of a young bowling pin setter whose days are spent manually resetting the pins of a rundown bowling alley.

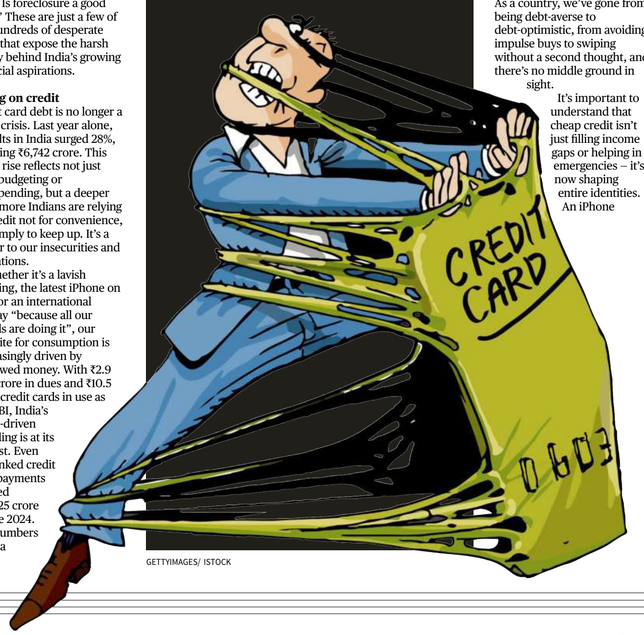
***Nomad Shadow*:** Japanese-American director Eimi Imanishi's deportation drama, produced by U.S.-based Indian-origin Shrihari Sathe, among others, is one of the first fiction films set in Western Sahara, at TIFF. It follows a young woman's difficult homecoming after being deported from Spain to Western Sahara.

***Karupy*:** Kalainithan Kalaichelvan's Canadian short film is about a bitter Tamil matriarch who shocks her family by announcing her plan to end her own life.

***I Fear Blue Skies*:** Salar Pashtoonyar's new short, a haunting portrayal of an aid worker's story, sheds light on a nation in turmoil.

SWIPE NOW, PAY FOREVER

Credit card addiction fuels a silent debt crisis across India



GETTYIMAGES/ ISTOCK

Lavanya Mohan

On the 'Credit Cards India' subreddit, a user writes, "Lost my job, ₹80k in credit card debt, no income. What are my options?" Another says, "Drowning in credit card debt (ICICI, Axis, HDFC, Federal) – no income, no support. Please help." A third asks, "Struggling with EMIs. Is foreclosure a good idea?" These are just a few of the hundreds of desperate posts that expose the harsh reality behind India's growing financial aspirations.

Living on credit

Credit card debt is no longer a silent crisis. Last year alone, defaults in India surged 28%, touching ₹6,742 crore. This sharp rise reflects not just poor budgeting or overspending, but a deeper shift: more Indians are relying on credit not for convenience, but simply to keep up. It's a mirror to our insecurities and aspirations.

Whether it's a lavish wedding, the latest iPhone on EMI, or an international holiday "because all our friends are doing it", our appetite for consumption is increasingly driven by borrowed money. With ₹2.9 lakh crore in dues and ₹10.5 crore credit cards in use as per RBI, India's credit-driven spending is at its highest. Even UPI-linked credit card payments crossed ₹63,825 crore by late 2024. The numbers show a disturbing shift – debt is now a normal way to spend.

What's fuelling the crisis?

Young India's debt spiral stems from a lack of awareness about how credit cards actually work. They're being marketed to 20-somethings as a ticket to the life they think they deserve – no caveats, no warnings. Unsurprisingly, Gen Z now makes up 41% of all first-time borrowers, according to CIBIL. As a country, we've gone from being debt-averse to debt-optimistic, from avoiding impulse buys to swiping without a second thought, and there's no middle ground in sight.

It's important to understand that cheap credit isn't just filling income gaps or helping in emergencies – it's now shaping entire identities. An iPhone becomes a symbol of success. A vacation on EMI is seen as proof of "work-life balance". Weddings, home upgrades, and even education choices are often driven more by perception than prudence.

The true cost of credit

For many, the wake-up call isn't dramatic – it's a text from the bank. Minimum due: ₹12,000. Interest charged: ₹3,500. Before long, the interest is more than the amount spent, since credit card rates can be 42% to 56% a year.

As someone who often talks about personal finance with people, I see that credit card debt, though common, isn't taken seriously enough because shame and guilt keep people silent. If you're in the red, know this, guilt won't help, but a plan will. The system may be built to keep you swiping, but there are ways to take back control.

Smart money moves

- **Do a debt audit:** List every loan, EMI, or credit card balance you owe. Include the interest rate, monthly payment, and due date. This isn't about shame, it's about clarity.
- **Understand your triggers:** Were you sad when you made that purchase? Was it FOMO, peer pressure, or guilt? Knowing how you feel when you spend is as important as knowing how much you spend. (Tip: keep a "why I spent" column next to your expenses.)
- **Make a "no" budget:** List what you won't spend on. No new gadgets till Diwali. No dining out more than twice a month. No gifts over ₹500 per person. These are boundaries, not punishments.
- **Reframe spending as trade-offs:** Instead of asking, "Can I afford this EMI?" ask, "What am I giving up to afford it?" Maybe it's quitting a toxic job or next year's holiday. Spend consciously, not compulsively.

Debt detox

Here are four strategies to help you break up with debt and get your money, and peace of mind, back on track.

1. Focus on getting debt-free

Credit card debt grows fast because high interest is charged not just on missed payments, but also on new spends. So, make clearing this debt your top priority, even if it means pausing your SIPs or pulling out from existing investments. Your savings, and sanity, will thank you later.

2. Avalanche or snowball?

If you have debt across multiple cards or EMIs, start by clearing the highest-interest ones first – this "avalanche" method makes your debt cheaper overall. The "snowball" method, where you pay off the smallest debts first to build momentum, can feel rewarding but may cost more in the long run.

3. Find additional income

Additional income can often be a saviour at times of financial distress. Taking on a freelance or gig role, even something as simple as teaching your neighbour's kids algebra, can help you pay off your debts faster.

4. Talk to your bank

It might surprise you, but your bank may help if you reach out before things get complicated. Most banks in India have hardship or collections teams that can restructure your dues, especially if you act early. You can ask for:

- Lower interest rates or a temporary freeze
- EMI conversion of your outstanding balance at a lower rate
- Waiver of late fees or penalties
- In extreme cases, a one-time "settlement" (note: this affects your credit score, so use it only as a last resort)

It's important to contact your bank as soon as possible. If your account defaults multiple times or is marked as a Non-Performing Asset (NPA), negotiating becomes much harder, and your credit score tanks.

Financial freedom isn't about how much we borrow. It's about how resilient we are when income slows, interest rates rise, or emergencies happen. As a country, we must go beyond access and talk about agency. That means clear disclosures, financial education in schools, and a culture where talking about money isn't taboo and living within your means is seen as wisdom, not a lack of ambition.

The writer is a chartered accountant and author of the personal finance book Money Doesn't Grow On Trees.

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

YIKES! YET ANOTHER PILE OF PLASTIC LITTER!
RELAX! THESE ARE JUST DISCARDED AGREEMENTS AFTER THE GLOBAL PLASTICS TREATY'S INCONCLUSIVE DEADLOCK.

FIGHTING THE SYSTEM

A Tamil Nadu professor's prolonged battle against caste bias. Will he get his university job and dignity back?

Akila Kannadasan
akila.k@thehindu.co.in

As a child, the clatter of rain on the tin roof of their mud home often gave P. Senrayaperumal sleepless nights. In his 20s and 30s, as a folk artist, he sang and danced late into the night, going days without proper sleep. Though his life changed after he secured the post of assistant professor at Manonmaniam Sundaranar University in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, sleep continues to elude the 43-year-old.

Senrayaperumal is now fighting a legal battle with the university, which removed him from his job over a year ago. He travels to Madurai for court hearings and meetings with his lawyer, with a file full of certificates and the hope of getting reinstated.

Early challenges

Senrayaperumal, who holds a Ph.D in Art History from Madurai Kamaraj University, was the first in a long line of folk artists to be awarded a doctorate. The journey was long and difficult. At 13, he was forced to drop out of school.

Seated in his home in Soolapuram village, 60 km from Madurai, he recalls walking back home from school for the last time as a Class VII student. "I knew I would be asked to stop going to school," he says. With eight mouths to feed, his father, K. Perumal, wanted him to join his folk theatre group, Soolapuram Sinna Set.

Preserving a dying art form

Perumal was an exponent of Raja Rani Attam, a folk art form popular in rural South Tamil Nadu. While not as ancient or closely-tied to temple rituals like Therukoothu, the art form faces stiff competition from the more popular Karagattam and Aadal Paadal dance shows based on film music.

A troupe typically consists of around 12 male performers in glittery costumes, who entertain crowds at temple festivals. Using song, dance, and theatre set to the beats of live percussion, they weave stories around family, values, and historical events. "The term 'Raja Rani' comes from the fact that each play features a Raja and a Rani, accompanied by a comedian," says Senrayaperumal.

Male actors who play the Rani grow their hair and train to walk and talk like a woman. "My father played the Rani, and so did I," he says. Performances take place at night in brightly lit village squares, continuing long past dawn. The folk art form has been carried forward by people from the Arunthathiyar Scheduled Caste community.

Game of life (Clockwise from above) P. Senrayaperumal; putting on make-up before a performance; playing the Rani; and dancing with his troupe in Madurai. (ASHOK R. AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Though busy six months a year, travelling between villages, life is far from easy. "We used to walk long distances in the sun, carrying our costumes bundled in cloth atop our heads," recalls Senrayaperumal. Now they can book taxis for events. "But the ₹35,000 we make per show is split among all the performers, and a large chunk goes towards travel," he says. Workplace dignity is also often a rarity, with those playing the Rani sometimes facing sexual harassment from onlookers.

From stage to school

When there are no bookings, the troupe performs at funerals. It was at one such event that Senrayaperumal felt sad about how his life had turned out. "I had to dance at the funeral of the grandfather of a former schoolmate," he says. "There were several boys and girls my age in the audience." They were all in college, and he was embarrassed to face them in costume and make-up. That night, he made up his mind to continue his education. He was seized by a *veri*, a rage, to study.

He juggled academics with shows, rehearsals, and pressure from his troupe to keep performing. After earning a B.A. and M.A. in history, followed by an M.Phil in Folk Performing Arts, he secured a Ph.D in 2013. "My thesis was on Raja Rani Attam and its social impact," he says. Only after being appointed at Manonmaniam Sundaranar University's Department of History through the SC(A) quota in 2016 could Senrayaperumal finally bury himself in books.

On his first day as assistant professor, he felt jittery. "But when I stood in front of my students, I realised I had no stage fear," he says, crediting it to years of performing.

No happy ending

After eight years in academia, when he was due for a promotion as the Head of Department, Senrayaperumal began hearing rumours about his imminent removal. Letters were sent to other departments questioning his 'irregular education'. "I received a letter informing me of my removal from service on March 13, 2024, without any discussion or chance to present my side of the story," he says. "This despite the university syndicate scrutinising and verifying my certificates before my appointment."

Senrayaperumal appealed his removal at the Madurai bench of the Madras High Court, which ruled in his favour. "I went back to work with a copy of the court order and a joining letter, only to be told that the Registrar planned to file an appeal," he says. When contacted by *The Hindu*, the Registrar refused to comment.

Fighting caste bias

Without a monthly salary, Senrayaperumal is running out of funds. His four brothers and two sisters are his only source of support. "We are unable to see him suffer after working so hard to secure this job," says P. Pilavadi, one of the brothers, who plays the comedian in the troupe. "We are not mere observers in this story, we are going through as much pain as he is."

Senrayaperumal knows that even if he wins the legal battle, life at the university will not be the same. "Everyone will look at me with prejudice," he says. "How will I be able to sit in my department, have tea at the canteen like before?" Even before the issue cropped up, many of his colleagues refused to interact much with him fearing censure from the higher-ups. For now, though, Senrayaperumal wishes to only focus on the legal proceedings.

"I have faith in our judiciary," he says, hoping the legal system will work in his favour. "I'm grateful for the support of Hon'ble Chief Justice (Retd.) Dr. S. Muralidhar, who has volunteered to appear in court for me pro bono," he says. But the question that haunts him is, "Would they have done this to me if I wasn't a Dalit?" He calls his removal "modern day casteism".

Life has come full circle as Senrayaperumal has returned to Raja Rani Attam. "I need money to survive," he says, adding, "I respect this art form, but I keep asking myself if this is growth."

Scan the QR to view a film on P. Senrayaperumal's journey on **magazine.thehindu.com**

Stills from *The Thursday Murder Club*; *Only Murders in the Building*; *Death Valley*; and *Matlock*.

BINGE WATCH

Vintage private eye

Elder sleuths are taking over our screens to redefine the super-intense, high-octane world of the whodunnit

In an early scene from *The Thursday Murder Club*, directed by veteran director Chris Columbus (*Home Alone*, *The Goonies*), retired spy Elizabeth (Helen Mirren) shows the local police inspector Hudson (Daniel Mays) a piece of evidence on her phone. Squinting hard in order to read on her archaic phone, Hudson quips, "What am I looking at? A really, really old phone?", prompting Elizabeth to fire back, "It may be old but it still works." Dispensing with the subtext is a hallmark of recent Netflix productions which are seldom concerned with subtlety. But one is inclined to forgive *The Thursday Murder Club* these little moments of laziness for its delightful cast and concept.

Based on Richard Osman's bestselling eponymous novel series, *The Thursday Murder Club* follows a group of senior citizen friends who live at the Cooper's Chase retirement home in Kent – and solve cold cases together for fun. The central investigative trio is the whip-smart ex-spy Elizabeth (Helen Mirren), pugnacious ex-trade unionist Ron (Pierce Brosnan) and methodical retired psychiatrist Ibrahim (Ben Kingsley), with former nurse Joyce (Celia Imrie) being the Everyman audience-proxy introduced to the trio at the beginning of the film. This frequently amusing 'cosy crime' caper also utilises a rapidly growing trend in films, TV and literature in recent years – the elderly sleuth.

What they lack in terms of youthful vigour, they more than make up for in wit, wisdom and resourcefulness. These help them operate in a world where the elderly are rendered invisible. The central conflict in *The Thursday Murder Club* involves shady realtors trying to bulldoze Cooper's Chase to build luxury flats. Joyce's daughter, a hedge-fund manager, seldom has the time to call her widowed mother. She feels Elizabeth and Co. is bad news for her mother Joyce, who should rather occupy herself with more age-appropriate activities.

Overlooked issues

Several recent films and TV shows have picked up on similar themes. BBC's *Death Valley* (2025) is among the more enjoyable ones, starring Timothy Spall as John Chapel, an eccentric retired actor and star of the (fictional) detective show *Caesar*. Post-retirement, John teams up with socially awkward cop Janie Mallowan (Gwyneth Keyworth) to solve local murders in rural Wales. What sets this show apart is the deliciously dark and morbid sense of humour on display. "I shouldn't cry, just got my lids done," says the vainglorious wife of the deceased in the first episode. Or when John sums up his partnership with Janie with the one-liner: "I'm the inspiration, you're the perspiration."

Kathy Bates, 77, an American national treasure, currently stars in the legal-procedural drama *Matlock* on CBS. The titular character is a retired septuagenarian who joins a high-powered law firm because she's raising her recently orphaned grandson. Secretly, she is plotting to take the law firm down from the inside because of their role in representing the pharma giants responsible for her daughter's death.

Matlock presents an American spin on much the same senior-citizen issues raised by *The Thursday Murder Club* – only worse and much more brutal, because it's America. In more than one episode, we see how so many American retirees struggle to pay their medical bills, locked in a never-ending bureaucratic battle with hospitals and insurers. The elderly are underestimated to an even greater degree than children are.

Welcome departure

Arguably the most popular example of this phenomenon, however, is the Hulu detective comedy series *Only Murders in the Building*, the fifth season of which streams from September 9. The show, both a tribute to and a parody of true crime podcasts, stars comedy legends Steve Martin and Martin Short alongside Selena Gomez. The unlikely trio of friends shares an apartment building and a remarkable chemistry while co-investigating a murder. Gomez has never looked as comfortable on screen as she does with the two Martins.

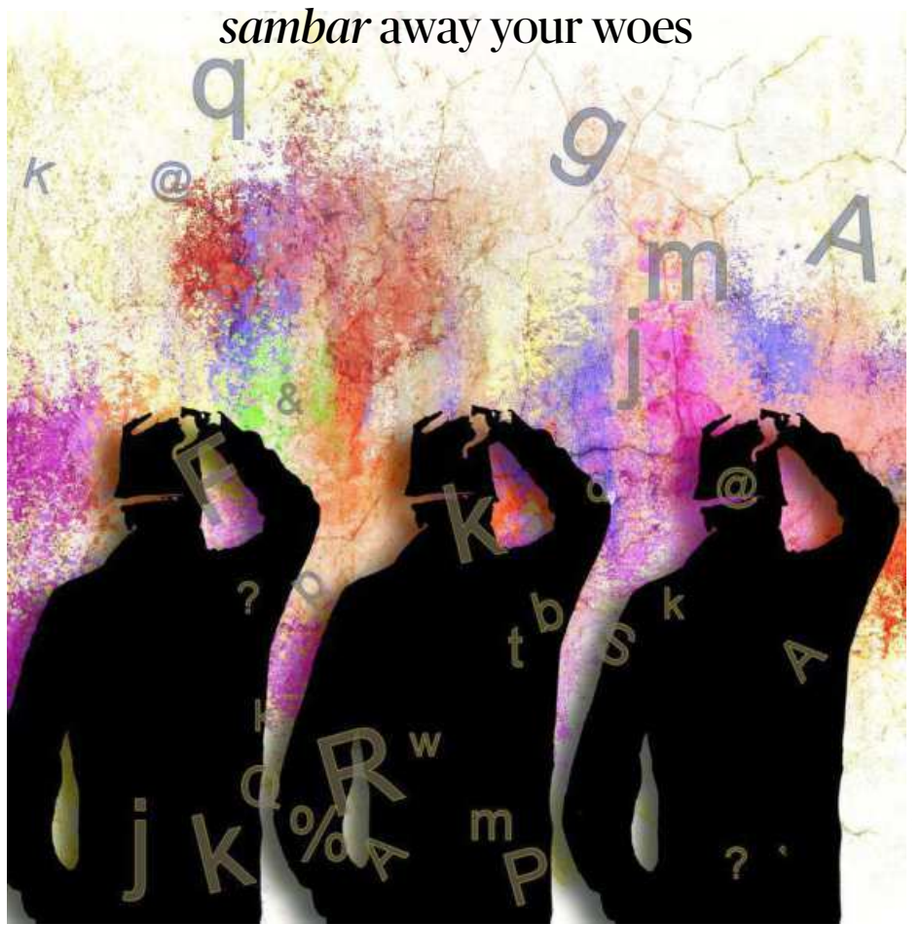
The elder sleuth represents a visual and narrative break from the super-intense, high-octane world of the whodunnit. Where the youthful detective runs towards firefights, the elder sleuth takes a step back, considers the larger picture and comes up with an asymmetric solution. With more viewers jumping aboard the 'cosy crime' train in recent years, expect more elder superstars playing detectives pretty soon.

Aditya Mani Jha is a writer and journalist working on his first book of non-fiction.

TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 16

PRESCRIPTION FOR DISASTER

About factually inaccurate advice and a dash of *toor* in hot lemon-turmeric water to *sambar* away your woes



GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

Some months ago, your columnist was stumbling around a cafe in Indiranagar in Bengaluru, trying to somehow find a plug point that actually worked.

Both my mobile phone and my laptop were low on battery. And I had a very important meeting to attend via Google Meet. It was imperative that I charged both my devices simultaneously. Which meant I needed one of those double plug points. (I needed my phone as a backup in case the cafe WiFi was one of those that only worked for the purposes of sending you an OTP, but nothing else.)

The cafe was replete with double points. But somehow none of them would work at the same time. Or if both did, then one of the sockets was being used by one of the other patrons. Eventually, a barista noted my consternation and jerry-rigged a solution for me.

She asked me to sit at a table right next to the counter that had a single socket. I connected my laptop to that socket. Meanwhile, the barista extended a charging cable from behind the counter to charge my phone.

Finally, I settled down, opened all my devices, inserted my earphones and connected to Google Meet. Only to realise that the meeting had been cancelled.

"Hope your meeting is going okay, sir?" the barista asked me over the counter. "We are not supposed to let customers use staff sockets. But, for you, special service!"

Readers, I was now in a quandary. I could have just closed the Google Meet window and carried on with my usual work. But what if the barista noticed that I had inconvenienced her for nothing? Imagine the awkwardness. Also, I really wanted to charge my devices. (Is there a word for the anxiety one feels due to under-charged devices? There should be one.)

So, I did the decent thing. I opened a video recording of an old Google Meet call and played it on silent on my computer. Meanwhile, I partook of a coffee and did some people-watching.

Which is when two people came and sat at the adjacent table. And led to the matter of this week's column. They were two men. An older man of around 45 years, and a much younger one, no more than 20.

Reader, I tried very hard to not eavesdrop on their conversation. But they were speaking very loudly and I was powerless to prevent their utterances from impinging upon my eardrums. So, with a very respectful *athithi audio bhava* approach, I listened.

"I have a terrible headache," the young man said as he reached into his pocket for a strip of tablets.

"What are you having?" the older man asked.

"Oh, some paracetamol."

"Are you insane? Put that nonsense away immediately..."

The old man then reached across the table, grabbed the paracetamol and shoved them into his own pockets.

"What!"

"Paracetamol is a scam. It doesn't work. It's just white powder. They just sell it to people to make money."

Trainedwreck

/ˈtreɪndrek/

noun

Definition: A qualified professional who uses their credentials to confidently dispense dangerous, incorrect, or nonsensical advice, often in situations where their expertise should provide reliable guidance.

Related forms:

Trainedwrecked (adjective): Describing advice or behaviour characteristic of a trainedwreck

Trainedwrecking (verb): The act of dispensing professionally-backed misinformation

Trainedwreckery (noun): The systematic practice of using credentials to spread nonsense

"Really?"

"Yes. 100%"

"So, what should I do then? Ibuprofen?"

"Even worse. I recommend having some warm water with lemon and turmeric. But don't let the water cool down. That can cause liver problems. Only warm water."

"Are you sure?" the young man asked doubtfully.

"Boss, I am a doctor, no? Trust me."

Readers, first of all, paracetamol is not a scam.

Second of all, if you are combining lemon and turmeric with hot water, then might as well add some *toor* dal and salt and make *sambar*.

And finally, why are some people like this?

Do you remember that COVID-19 situation from a few years ago? Were you on WhatsApp groups? I was on several. And across every single one of these groups, the single most factually inaccurate information on COVID-19 was shared by doctors, pharmacists, and other such professionals.

Someone would say: "Oh no, my test came positive today." And a doctor would confidently say: "Please try again after sunset. The sun's intergalactic solar vibrations can interfere with the test."

And everyone on the WhatsApp group would maintain silence because in India you must respect elders even if the elder's brain is indistinguishable from a small sapota fruit.

I have decided there must be a word to describe such ostensibly qualified people who proudly and relentlessly spout absolute, utter and often dangerous nonsense. And that word is: trainedwreck.

Example sentence: The professor proved himself a complete trainedwreck when he explained to his computer science students that Gmail becomes slower during the monsoon because "cloud computing is very vulnerable to weather conditions".

Have you been a victim of trainedwreckery? Tell me everything.

Sidin Vadukut *lives in London and is currently working on a new novel. He blogs at www.whatay.com.*

GOREN BRIDGE

What next?

East-West vulnerable, East deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from the Cavendish Invitational Pairs a few years ago. Top players from around the world are invited to play with big cash prizes for the high finishers. West was Antonio Sementa, one of the many fine players coming from Italy. Sementa's four-heart bid was twoway - it might make, or it might push the opponents too high. Good defense would have defeated four hearts by two tricks, but North didn't know that. He soldiered on to four spades hoping for the best. Four spades is a poor contract, but with a 2-2 spade split, the ace of clubs onside, and the jack of diamonds dropping, it might make against less than perfect defense.

Sementa led the ace of hearts, seeing the two from partner. What next? It was tempting to lead a safe heart and not break either of the minor suits, but Sementa found the winning defense of cashing the ace of clubs and leading another club. Playing any other suit would allow declarer to play two rounds of trumps. A club shift then would allow declarer to win with the king and lead diamonds. The fall of the jack would allow the discard of a low club. This play by Sementa set up a second club trick for the defense before the trumps were drawn and Sementa cashed the jack of clubs when in with the king of spades. Well judged in the bidding and the play by Sementa.

NORTH
♠ 10 5 4
♡ J 9
◇ K 10 8 7
♣ K 7 6 3

WEST
♠ K J
♡ A 7 5 3
◇ J 6 2
♣ A J 9 8

EAST
♠ Q 9
♡ K Q 10 8 6 2
◇ 9 5 4
♣ Q 5

SOUTH
♠ A 8 7 6 3 2
♡ 4
◇ A Q 3
♣ 10 4 2

The bidding:

EAST	SOUTH	WEST	NORTH
2♡	2♠	4♡	4♠
All pass			

Opening lead: Ace of ♡

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has September 7 ever given us?

The Yardbirds perform at City Winery in New York. (GETTY IMAGES)

Berty Ashley

1 On September 7, 1251 BCE, a total solar eclipse was recorded by the Ancient Greeks. This is also noted as the birth of a legendary Greek hero. The son of Zeus and Alcmene, he was a champion who defeated many monsters in the course of 12 labours. Who is this hero whose name still lives on as a reference to strength?

2 On this date in 1630, this city was founded in North America by Puritan settlers. The site of many historical events, it is the capital of Massachusetts. Which city is this that is now a global leader in education?

3 According to some sources, on September 7, 1813, this term was first used to refer to the United States by *The Troy Post* of New York. During the War of 1812, Samuel Wilson, a meat packer, used to send meat to the army in barrels stamped 'U.S', to refer to the government. What did the soldiers refer to it as?

4 On September 7, 1888, Edith Eleanor McLean became the first baby to be placed in a brand-new device at State Emigrant Hospital in New York. What was this device that provides a safe and controlled space for premature babies to live while their organs develop?

5 On September 7, 1923, a five-day International Criminal Police Commission Conference came to a close in Vienna. It was also the start of the world's largest such organisation in the world. By what name is the International Criminal Police Organisation better known as?

6 On September 7, 1936, the last thylacine passed away at the Hobart Zoo in Tasmania. It was a carnivorous marsupial that existed for thousands of years till humans came to Australasia. It is better known by another name because of the dark stripes on its body. What animal is this, which researchers hope to bring out of extinction?

7 On September 7, 1936, the Boulder Dam started operating on the Colorado River between Nevada and Arizona. It generates electricity for millions of residents, and at its base is 660 feet thick to handle the pressure of the water. By what name is it now known, after it was renamed for the 31st President?

8 On September 7, 1968, four friends made their live debut as *The New Yardbirds* before about 1,200 students at Egegard School in Denmark. They needed to change their name, so they chose 'lead balloon'. They eventually changed it a bit and became international rock stars, as what band?

9 On September 7, 1979, a new TV channel called the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network launched. Its first show was SportsCenter, which soon became very popular. Currently owned by Disney, by what name does it go by nowadays?

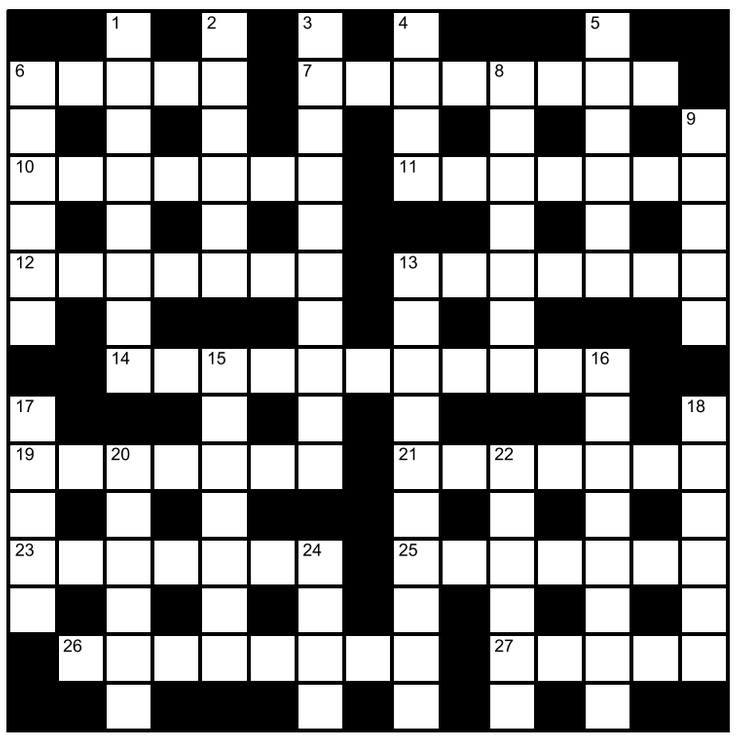
10 On September 7, 2022, *Nature* published a paper on the discovery of a 31,000-year-old skeleton in Borneo. Researchers were startled to find that the lower left leg was missing, with the shin bones fused at the end. This is thought to be the earliest evidence of what now-common medical procedure?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. Hercules
2. Boston
3. Uncle Sam
4. Incubator
5. Interpol
6. Tasmanian Tiger
7. Hoover Dam
8. Led Zeppelin
9. ESPN
10. Amputation

THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 20 (Set by Arden)



Across

6 Some time left to return to the plant (5)
7 Amateurs invite ridicule in such beds (8)
10 Alcohol for one in fancy hotel (7)
11 Screams from brave wives sipping cocktail (7)
12 Emerge with one on rollers (7)
13 Intended, those evacuated to be provided food (7)
14 Gets a degree abroad to end separation between races (11)
19 Threw in front having made a move on board (7)
21 One captures hearts - Church is free (7)
23 Islander lets loose in West, say (7)
25 Lazzarone opposed to a US President (7)
26 Check list rejected as one wills (8)
27 Mean to just remove the leader (5)

Down

1 Tied to the regular trend around that place (8)
2 Girl is bringing up some raw earth (6)
3 Questioned English language learners over modified coverage (10)
4 Some of them used to fly long time ago (4)
5 Criticize someone angrily weeks before end of war (6)
6 Renovates building, it's artless, anyway (4,2)
8 Work unit reorganised, supported by a plant (7)
9 Remark on a team (5)
13 Reach out to accept vague compromise from a revolutionary (3,7)
15 Obvious way to describe "strange" (7)
16 Foul play? Then find the total energy of the system (8)
17 School affected by a mischief maker (5)
18 No one in city goes around in headgear, but they're talkative... (6)
20 ...everyone in place with a headgear (6)
22 A horse in his possession gets a delicacy in Scotland (6)
24 Food with extra tables outside (4)

SOLUTION NO. 19

P	O	L	E	S	■	D	E	S	I	C	C	A	N	T
A	■	O	■	Q	■	A	■	O	■	H	■	S	■	E
R	A	C	Q	U	E	T	■	L	E	A	T	H	E	R
A	■	K	■	I	■	A	■	V	■	L	■	A	■	M
G	R	O	U	N	D	B	R	E	A	K	I	N	G	■
L	■	U	■	T	■	A	■	■	■	O	■	T	■	■
I	O	T	A	■	■	S	A	V	O	U	R	I	N	G
D	■	■	■	B	■	E	■	A	■	T	■	■	■	O
E	V	E	T	E	A	S	E	R	■	■	Z	E	R	O
■	■	M	■	D	■	■	■	I	■	P	■	D	■	D
■	S	P	I	R	A	L	G	A	L	A	X	I	E	S
R	■	T	■	O	■	A	■	B	■	R	■	F	■	E
O	R	I	O	L	E	S	■	L	E	S	B	I	A	N
O	■	E	■	L	■	S	■	E	■	E	■	E	■	S
T	U	R	N	S	P	I	T	S	■	C	U	R	V	E

Rewiring brains for **digital privacy**

The instincts that secured survival make humans vulnerable now; solution is to reinterpret and reinforce them with new frameworks fit for this age

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R.KUMAR

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Not long ago, a case crossed my courtroom Bench that left a lasting impression on me. A woman had formed a trusting connection with a man and feeling secure, agreed to share an intimate moment during a video call. Unclothed, she believed she was as safe as if she were alone in her own room. But that trust was shattered. The man secretly recorded her without consent and shared the video with others.

It forced me to ask a profound question: how did she come to believe that standing naked before a camera was as private and safe as standing unclothed before someone in a closed room?

The answer is not simply about trust or caution – it lies deep within the architecture of the human brain, a brain shaped over millennia for a very different world than the one we inhabit today.

For countless thousands of years, human beings lived in tightly knit tribes of small numbers, typically around 150 people, where everyone knew each other's faces, names, and stories. Our brains evolved in these intimate social settings, learning to assess trust through physical presence, body language, and the protective boundaries of walls and doors. Acts of vulnerability, like intimacy, were conducted where the consequences were tangible and visible. Trust and privacy were rooted in real, physical proximity, the shared space of a room or a campfire, where betrayal was costly and unlikely.

But in today's digital age, those rules have been fractured. Intimacy can now unfold on screens, mediated by devices that create a deceptive sense of privacy. What feels to the user like a private room is, in truth, a vast and open space, a digital arena accessible instantly to thousands or even millions of people around the globe. The human brain, still wired for a world of face-to-face tribes and physical presence, struggles to grasp this new reality. Our ingrained instincts whisper safety while the world around us moves at a speed and scale unimaginable to our ancestors. This discrepancy exposes a hard truth for society, judges, and lawmakers: the protections and laws conceived to safeguard trust and privacy were crafted for a physical world. Those laws must now evolve to shield individuals in a digital landscape where harm is diffuse, instantaneous, and often invisible. What once was betrayal between known members of a community can now explode across networks with a simple click, wreaking damage that evolutionary psychology was not designed to anticipate.

The woman in that courtroom did what was natural, to trust based on instinct shaped by millions of years of evolution. The failure was not in her awareness or intellect. It was in the mismatch between prehistoric wiring and modern technology. Our brains have been sculpted for survival via trust in small groups, for interpreting the subtle cues of body language and eye contact, for knowing that betrayal carries real consequences in a shared, visible world. But we did not evolve for the vast anonymity of cities, let alone an online network where unknown strangers may see us without consent or recourse.

Trust, in the tribal context, was a cornerstone of survival – it was a binding contract that ensured cooperation in hunting, child-rearing, and protection. Betrayal was an existential threat, and social mechanisms evolved to punish those who broke that trust. Today, trust can be violated with ease, and harm multiplies invisibly, perpetuated by anonymous technology. The digital realm transforms acts of intimacy into evidence, gossip, and currency traded behind screens, while our minds lean toward openness and vulnerability. This is a fundamental source of human fragility in the digital era.

Yet, in this challenge lies the resilience of human nature. Our history is a testament to adaptability – through ice ages, famines, wars, and extinction threats, humanity has prevailed not through brute force alone but through cooperation. We survived because we learned to bind together with trust and collective effort. The very instincts that once secured our survival also make us vulnerable now; but they also give us the power to change the conditions that threaten us.

The solution is not to abandon our tribal brains but to reinterpret and reinforce them with new frameworks fit for this age. We once created laws to curb violence that threatened our ancestors; now, we must build ethical, legal, and technical protections to safeguard digital intimacy. If the sacredness of intimacy deserved protection in a cave, around a fire, or behind the walls of a home, it deserves no less in the realm of cyberspace.

Our ingrained instincts whisper safety while the world around us moves at a speed and scale unimaginable to our ancestors. This discrepancy exposes a hard truth for society, judges, and lawmakers

In that courtroom, I did not just witness a case of exploitation, I saw a collision of timescales. On one side flows the slow current of human evolution that forged our brains, instincts, and social norms. On the other surges the fast flood of disruptive technology, a force that moves faster than our consciousness and regulation can comprehend. Until we reconcile these opposing timelines, we will remain as cave people wielding smartphones, hearts tuned to trust, yet exposed behind infinite glass walls.

New thinking

The path forward demands new thinking. Judges and lawmakers must recognise digital injuries as real harms, no less important than physical violations. Society must develop rules that govern digital behaviour, not just with punitive laws but also with technological safeguards and cultural norms that reinforce dignity and privacy. Education must evolve to teach digital literacy that matches emotional instincts with rational caution about the digital world's risks.

This challenge springs from the fundamental mismatch of two speeds – the slow evolution of the brain and the rapid exponential growth of technology. Until bridged, this gap will leave many vulnerable. But humans have never been passive observers to such transitions. Throughout history, it is our capacity to cooperate, empathise, and innovate that has preserved us.

The choice is stark. We can allow digital technologies to erode trust, scatter intimacy, and leave people vulnerable to endless exploitation. Or we can harness our ancient gift for cooperation to create a safer digital humanity. If we succeed, the digital world may yet become a place where the privacy and dignity once guarded in caves are honoured anew. Our instinct to trust may remain, not as a liability, but as a foundation for a connected, compassionate society on this frontier.

The letter that missed its mark

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In April 1988, I wrote a letter that never reached its destination – yet it etched itself forever into my life story. Just days earlier, I had got engaged in a quiet village in Una, Himachal Pradesh. At the time, I was working as a document writer in the district courts of Amritsar, far from my village in Kangra. My fiancée and I had only met briefly. Soon after the engagement, fortune smiled. I received an ad-hoc appointment as a stenographer in the Income Tax Department. Overjoyed, I wrote a heartfelt letter to my bride-to-be. I addressed it carefully, using her name and her father's, trusting the postman to deliver it safely.

When the letter reached her village, my sister-in-law was at the door. She feared village gossip. A letter from a future groom could be misread, so she refused to accept it.

To make things more complicated, another man in the village shared my fiancée's father's name. The postman, confused, handed it to that family. As luck would have it, a cousin of mine saw the envelope, recognised my handwriting, and understood the mistake. She replied warmly, congratulating me and explaining what had happened. When her letter arrived, my heart skipped a beat. Could it be from my fiancée? But as I opened it, reality smiled – it was from my cousin. Not the romantic reply I had imagined, but a moment that still makes me chuckle. And yet, the warmth of that letter stayed with me – as did the one that never reached its mark.

Rila Monastery, a symbol of resilience

The monumental site, Bulgaria's largest Eastern Orthodox monastery, is nestled in the highest mountain range in the Balkan Peninsula and southeast Europe

Mountain redoubt A view of the Rila Monastery, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Bulgaria. GETTY IMAGES

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As we drove along the narrow, mountainous road to Rila Monastery, my co-passenger mused, "I suppose the gods all over the world choose to manifest in mountains, caves, or places away from humanity." From a distance, I could see a stunning fortress-like structure against the backdrop of a snow-clad mountain that reminded me of Mount Kailash. It was late April.

Nestled in the Rila Mountains, the highest mountain range in the Balkan Peninsula and southeast Europe, at an elevation of 1,147 metres, this monumental site is Bulgaria's largest Eastern Orthodox monastery. Located about 117 km south of Sofia, it covers an area of 8,800 square metres. Ivan Rilski, or Saint John of Rila, the patron saint of Bulgaria, was a 10th-century hermit who founded the monastery during the first Bulgarian Empire (7th-11th century CE). The monastery houses his relics.

Striking blend

The architecture of the Rila Monastery complex is a striking blend of medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque styles. It is quadrangular, surrounded by high stone walls that rise to 24 metres, and features narrow windows and arched entrances. The residential buildings encircle an inner courtyard that accommodates about 60 monks. It includes monks' cells, guest rooms, a library, a dining hall, and a museum. Arched porticoes and open-air balconies frame the courtyard, showcasing black-and-white striped patterns and vivid colours.

Inside the complex is a beautiful church dedicated to the Virgin Mother, rebuilt between 1834 and 1837. It is a five-domed church arranged in a cross shape, featuring vibrant frescoes painted by artists such as Zahari Zograf and an elaborately carved wooden icon screen. Its architecture combines Neo-Byzantine and Baroque styles. The complex includes Hrelyo's Tower, a 23-metre-high medieval structure designed in the Bulgarian style, which features a chapel with frescoes on the top floor.

The residential refuge has faced challenging times. The original structure was destroyed during the Ottoman conquest and was reconstructed between 1335 and 1343 CE. Subsequently, part of it was destroyed by fire in 1833 during the Bulgarian National Revival and was rebuilt between 1834 and 1862 through generous donations.

During the fight against the Ottomans, the monastery served as a sanctuary for revolutionaries and preserved valuable manuscripts, clergy, and scholars. Monks and clergy from Rila indirectly supported revolutionary movements. After Bulgaria gained independence in 1878, the monastery was honoured as a symbol of national identity, and in 1983, it was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The area is home to the seven Rila Lakes, which are situated one above the other and connected by small streams that create tiny waterfalls and cascades. Visitors must use a ropeway and then climb on foot to reach these lakes.

As we departed the monastery complex, I reflected on the remarkable resilience of the human spirit in sustaining a way of life.

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

Contemporary Indian art is vibrant, with festivals and private institutions drawing global attention. ('Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2025: scaffolding the future'; Aug. 31) Yet, the challenges are structural: inconsistent public funding, metro-centric markets, and high costs and taxes that complicate growth. With stronger infrastructure, wider international participation, and funding support that extends beyond the metros, the sector's prospects appear both durable and inclusive.
N.S. Reddy

The Kochi-Muziris Biennale has had to cope with many issues, right from its conceptualisation stage. The curator Nikhil Chopra and his team have to give their best to impress the domestic audience as well as the demanding international visitors. Such periodic endeavours are worth the effort as they result in an exceptional and extraordinary output of international standards.
M.V. Nagavender Rao

Collective defiance

Arundhati Roy wields her pen like a literary axe, slicing through lies, silence, and power with unflinching precision. ('I just want to be me. Let me be'; Aug. 31) From walking with the Narmada's displaced people to amplifying Kashmir's muted laments, Roy transforms personal scars and lived violence into collective defiance. In her interviews, she has emerged as a relentless seeker of truth. Her words prove that literature can still awaken the conscience, unsettle power, and ignite rebellion.
Vijay Singh Adhikari

The interview has revealed several shades of Roy's personality that has turned her into a celebrity not just in the literary firmament but also across the social mainstream. In her memoir, Roy is unlikely to have held back anything while discussing her tumultuous relationship with her mother, Mary Roy, a woman of indomitable will and spirit in her own right.
C.V. Aravind

However difficult our parents are, we don't wash our dirty linen in public. Is the idea to sell more books? I also don't like the picture on the book cover — it is a bit pretentious.
Col. R.D. Singh

It is distressing to note that, as if Roy's vilification for holding contrary views on the ethos and working of the present ruling regime was not enough, she and many more like her continue to suffer in their personal lives as well.
Deepak Taak

Sensitive topic

Phuphee has touched upon a rarely discussed and sensitive issue faced by a large number of women. ('The curse of desire'; Aug. 31) Even a hint of a woman's unfulfilled desires is frowned upon, and she is shunned by society, including other women, due to generations of social conditioning. Men should set aside their ego and get themselves treated to save the institution of marriage.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Saving the wells
Once a symbol of community and care, they are now used as garbage pits
Devyansh Pandey

India's silent crisis: an ageing population
There is a need for a comprehensive and multi-sectoral approach to address this silent crisis
Abha Jaiswal

Weighing the emotional load
A look at the invisible labour women have been undertaking
Rajasree Biswas

Lighting a fire
The matchbox has receded to the background at homes, leaving behind a trail of memories
Pulluru Jagadishwar Rao

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THE HINDU
magazine
Sunday, September 7, 2025

From reimagining *patola* to being showcased in museums, the designer blurs the lines between fashion, art and innovation

THE MANY TEXTURES OF RIMZIM DADU

Nishat Fatima

She's known today for her steel-wire saris but Rimzim Dadu started her career with models stomping out in mini dresses and lace-up men's shoes. That said, she created her own textiles from day one. And while her debut at couture week is only a few years old, everybody agrees that couture is what she has been doing all along.

The contradictions that are Rimzim Dadu have made her one of India's most interesting designers. As American novelist Susan Sontag wrote, 'To name something as interesting implies challenging old orders of praise,' and Dadu is a tiny, unassuming powerhouse whose work, straddling textile innovation, western sensibility, and Indian weaving heritage, has kept me engaged over the years. Hers was also one of the most interesting shows of the recent Hyundai India Couture Week. Titled Oxynn, she started working on it a week after her second daughter was born in February and reveals that she has never felt more vulnerable with a collection because every ensemble felt so personal.

The collection took her obsession with the *patola* a step further – with a wool and leather version of the double *ikat* weave featured at London's Victoria & Albert Museum in the Fabric of India exhibition in 2015. "The Lambani tribes of Gujarat really stood out for the textiles they wear, their craft and jewellery. It was so rooted and traditional, I thought it would be interesting to reimagine what futuristic versions of tribal weaves and crafts could look like," says Dadu. In a larger lexicon, the Delhi-based designer's work is part of the India Modern aesthetic espoused by a handful of designers, including Amit Aggarwal, Gaurav Gupta, Anand Bhushan, Arjun Saluja, and Kallol Dutta.

India Couture Week shows have been dominated by *lehengas*, embroidery, and cancan in the past decade. Dadu's reimagining of Banjara tribal work was far from that. Oxidised jewellery, mirror work, and tactile craftsmanship were turned into sculptural corsets, harem pants, and East-meets-West form-fitting *lehenga*-gown saris. To echo designer Rajesh Pratap (known for his modern minimalist experimentation with traditional techniques, textile innovation, and unbending originality) who has seen Dadu's work in images, "It looks fantastic."

Bridging prêt and couture

Interesting, however, comes with its own baggage. It's usually shorthand for niche or not in the mainstream. And yet, Dadu has breached that chasm. Over the past few years, her label has become part of the mainstream. What was established with her steel sari, worn by Sonam Kapoor at Cannes in 2016, gathered steam with her menswear line in 2019, and accelerated when her brand turned 15 in 2022, marked by a show at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art.

Right after, she debuted at India Couture Week in 2023, opened a standalone menswear store in DLF Emporio in Delhi in 2024, and expanded her footprint to Hyderabad in 2025. Multibrand retail is restricted to Pernia's Pop-Up Shop; she also does footwear and bags, and is planning to go international with an expansion to West Asia. Her celebrity line-up is growing, too, from actors Kareena Kapoor Khan to Janhvi Kapoor, and philanthropist Radhika Merchant Ambani. Ambani's outing in Dadu's creation has even sparked that absolute sign of being mainstream – a viral hate reel, more on which later.

According to Mumbai-based fashion stylist Sohiny Das who has worked on her shows for the past four years, Dadu has managed a difficult task: "Retain what she started with, but also evolve it dramatically, bridge prêt and couture, and be able to do both." Das points out that Dadu was very texture-based at the beginning, but over the years has realised the importance of shape.

Ahead of the curve (Clockwise from left) A design from Rimzim Dadu's India Couture Week collection; more of her creations at the Hyderabad store; and the designer. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

'I'm really creating for women'

Dadu, 38, now the mother of two girls – Ose, three, and Raga, six months – spent her childhood, from the age of five, at her father's export house making her own tie-and-dye patterns, watching embroidery being done, and being fascinated by spools of threads and button machines. She started her label, then called My Village, at GenNext, Lakmé Fashion Week 2007, right after graduating from Pearl Academy in Delhi.

Over the years, she has experimented with paper, wool, silicon, chiffon, steel wires, acrylic with textiles, and leather, shredding them to develop cords and weaving those together to achieve a structure that fabric would not allow. None of this is abstract experimentation. "I'm not creating to prove a point or for museums. I'm really creating for women, for people. I actively think of how each piece can fit into their wardrobes, and the functionality of it is very important for me," she says. Her online prêt ensembles are in the range of ₹1-₹3 lakh.

And yet, the fact that her work is in museums seems natural. Apurva Kackar, director of KNMA's Institutional Affairs and Outreach, where Dadu's 15th anniversary show became the first physical showcase of their Art x Fashion series, points out that the designer's presentation was alongside an Anupam Sud retrospective at the museum and that both challenged the patriarchal space of printmaking and fashion. "Dadu's work blurs the boundaries between fashion, art, and material innovation, qualities that resonate strongly with our vision for the Art x Fashion series. She has consistently challenged conventional perceptions of textiles and craft, transforming materials into sculptural forms," says Kackar. "This experimental, thought-provoking approach made her a natural fit for our collaboration."

Challenging controversies

It's surprising then that Dadu recently found herself in the eye of an Instagram storm being accused of copying a Tom Ford dress from his 2020 show for Radhika Merchant Ambani. Dadu, who was forwarded the reel by a bunch of people, is fuming. "Fringe dresses have been around for centuries. Tom Ford wasn't the first to do one. It's like saying I've copied *patola*. The first time I did fringe was in 2014. It was made with chiffon that had been ripped apart and made into cords. We created fringe dresses, tops, and a sari, before Tom Ford. I don't think Tom Ford looked at me and copied it." She adds, "There are bullies everywhere, and everybody who has an Instagram account now is a fashion guru, and we must listen to them."

Dadu's annoyance is easy to understand given her years of experimentation. Designer and friend of 20 years, Anand Bhushan, who recalls bonding over design, food, and a shared panic at meeting show deadlines – he has flown with Dadu's garments from Delhi to Mumbai just in time for her show – believes that what sets her apart is her consistent innovation. "A lot of designers lose that sense of originality, their need to innovate every season, to get seriously excited about their work. I've seen Rimzim from the time she was a kid partying every night and going to work in the mornings to becoming a mother of two beautiful daughters and managing a complete business, and innovating... it's beautiful."

The author is a photographer and writer.

Loot, loss, and learning in Berlin

At a time when cultural restitution is being hotly debated, this German institution is doing its best

Charukesi Ramadurai

(Clockwise from left) Humboldt Forum; a footrest from Cameroon; and artefacts from India. (CHARUKESI RAMADURAI, GETTY IMAGES)

When the Humboldt Forum opened in 2021, it was met with excitement and quite a lot of controversy. The latter because the newest addition to Berlin's already impressive ensemble of museums is a testament to colonial acquisitions – with over 20,000 objects in their vast collection taken (more often than not, forcibly) during a time of European expansion. Think Nataraja bronzes from the Chola era, delicate Ming-era porcelain, an intricately beaded Mandu Yenu throne from Cameroon, and ivory tools from Namibia.

Over the last four years, however, it has become a more collaborative project, states professor Lars-Christian Koch. "This means that we are inviting international experts and source communities to work with our collections, in our museum storage and in exhibitions. And we are working together in provenance research to find out where these objects came from and what they mean to the people [who originally owned them]," he says.

Humboldt Forum contains two formal museums: the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, along with a branch of the Berlin State Museum, and the Humboldt University of Berlin that operates an open space called the Humboldt Lab. The intention of the site, shares Koch, who represents the State Museum of Berlin at the Forum, is to surprise, provoke and hopefully initiate dialogue and discourse on the contents of the museum.

Confronting colonialism's crimes

The exhibits are fascinating and eclectic but raise the question: whose art is it? Who do these artefacts belong to? These are pertinent questions that prestigious museums such as The Met in New York and the British Museum in London have continually chosen to ignore or brush aside – claiming that their collections were either bought legally from private collectors or "gifted" by local rulers to their colonial masters. But given the inherent power imbalance at play, the idea of any kind of treasure being handed over voluntarily by the subjugated is ludicrous.

But in western Europe, there is a growing voice for cultural restitution, or returning the spoils of colonialism to their original owners and creators, such as the eighth century stone sculpture of Durga Mahishasuramardini to India by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Humboldt Forum, for instance, is looking into the provenance of their exhibits, acknowledging that many come from an age of brutal oppression and reckless ransacking. It starts with an open acknowledgement on their website and in several official statements that "the objects from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia and Oceania are witness to a long colonial and racist history" and a promise that it "provides resources for and is heavily involved in programmes that confront colonialism and its crimes".

This is only fitting, given that Germany perpetrated several mini holocausts in the 19th century in its African colonies such as Tanzania, Namibia, Burundi and Cameroon. And that is where a large chunk of the exhibits are from. Benin bronzes, violently looted by British forces in the late 19th century, are among the most prized African artefacts, and are currently dispersed among dozens of museums across the world. Germany returned formal ownership of 500 Benin bronzes to Nigeria, with just a handful remaining in the museum on temporary loan. "Our partners in Nigeria were very clear they want their culture exhibited in our museum, so we involved them in the process," says Koch. "We had an educationalist from Benin City in our museum for eight weeks, working on the text and educational programmes."

All on board

The notion of restitution or reparation may seem ideal, but it is not always easy or straightforward – starting from the simple fact that geopolitical borders keep changing and a land that an object came from may not even exist today. "We have to do thorough research, from finding out what these objects mean for [that] society and who is the right contact," explains Koch. "So, we involve our international partners from the institutions in those countries."

Occasionally, the communities don't want their treasure back, preferring to focus on more current issues instead. Case in point: a 52 foot-long double hulled boat from Papua New Guinea. The boat, strikingly displayed at Humboldt in a manner that makes it seem like it is sailing, hides a backstory of the bloody massacre that led to its exit from the region. This is one of 65,000 objects from the South Pacific region in the museum's collection, but the people of Papua New Guinea want it to remain there. "They have requested our help to learn to build a replica in their own country," says Andrea Brandis, the museum's press officer.

Through the year, the museum also hosts temporary exhibitions and workshops created with a focus on making the objects relevant for foreign audiences and bringing them to life as contemporary "cultural belongings". For instance, along with the museum displays from Tanzania, there is an ongoing exhibition by living artists from the country.

Talking of restitution, Koch states, "These are political decisions, and we can only offer our recommendations. What we can do is to strengthen our networks and continue with capacity building with our partners across countries." In a Germany still grappling with memories of the Holocaust and the more recent crisis of immigrants and refugees, it is encouraging to see an interest in tackling a conversation about righting colonial wrongs. While critics maintain it is too little too late, it is still a good start.

The independent journalist writes on travel, art and culture, sustainability and conservation.